

# The Letelier Prosecutor: An

By Timothy S. Robinson

Washington Post Staff Writer

In Chile, he is greeted by hordes of Spanish-speaking reporters shouting "Prosecutor Propper, Prosecutor Propper" and hidden photographers wait to snap his picture as he walks down streets or comes out of buildings.

His comings and goings are documented with bold red headlines, and newspapers speculate on matters ranging from his briefcase, which they think is "James Bond-equipped," to the specially built car they say is flown to Chile from the United States for his use there, and even his alleged love life when he is in Santiago.

The object of the attention is 31-year-old Eugene M. Propper, whose life is not nearly as exotic as the Chilean press proclaims.

One of 161 assistant U.S. attorneys in the District of Columbia, he was assigned by chance two years ago to investigate what many people thought would be the unsolvable assassination of former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier.

Tuesday, he stood before a federal judge here and calmly asked that three Chilean secret police (DINA) officials—including the feared ex-director of the agency—be arrested in the Sept. 21, 1976, bombing murder of Letelier and an aide Ronni K. Moffitt on Sheridan Circle.

Along the way, in a manner unrivaled in many major investigations, the flamboyantly bearded Propper and drawing FBI agent L. Carter Cornick have become the international symbols of the dogged persistence of U.S. authorities to solve the Letelier murder case.

Propper and Cornick say they cannot directly discuss the Letelier case because of the pending trials. But a clear picture has emerged of two well-matched, plodding and innovative investigators who have come out, so far, smelling like roses in a case that easily could have generated a very different aroma.

On Sept. 21, 1976, Propper was sitting in the U.S. Courthouse cafeteria when his supervisor, Donald E. Campbell, asked him if he would take the case. He knew nothing about Chile other than what he had read in newspapers, and spoke no Spanish.

Cornick, a 38-year-old University of Virginia graduate and ex-marine, had a reputation of sorts of minor boat-rocking in the normally staid world of loan-alike FBI agents, some of his acquaintances say. He had just arrived

## Unlikely Celebrity

## in Santiago

in the Washington field office after a stint in bomb-rocked Puerto Rico, and he came to mind when Washington FBI agent-in-charge Nick F. Stames was looking for a Spanish-speaking agent to assign to the Letelier case.

Cornick and Propper seemed to work together well quickly according to people who watched them at the time. Propper's ego was such that he would make seemingly outrageous demands; Cornick would soft-soap those demands so that they seemed perfectly normal when they were relayed.

Propper, who is from New Hyde Park, Long Island, earned an undergraduate degree in economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a law degree from the University of Minnesota. He worked briefly for the Justice Department be-

fore joining the U.S. attorney's office in 1972 to get trial experience.

He had worked in various sections of the prosecutor's office trying crimes including murders and rapes, and had joined the fairly elite major crimes division—where he dealt with such matters as contract murders and the widely publicized second Sting project involving undercover agents who operated a fake stolen-goods shop. At the time of the Letelier blast,

he was contemplating leaving the office to enter the more lucrative field of private practice.

Propper was known as a cocky young man, outspoken in his views about some aspects of office policy but not any sort of "star" in the courtroom or in his handling of investigations.

In one of the more touchy aspects of the early part of the investigation, the Justice Department and the FBI



Chilean newspaper and magazine articles devoted to "El Fiscal Propper."



**L. CARTER CORNICK**  
... Spanish-speaking boat rocker



**E. LAWRENCE BARCELLA JR.**  
... behind-the-scenes supervisor

had to "sell" themselves to the friends and coworkers of the victims, who had worked at the Institute for Policy Studies, a leftist think tank here that had been spied upon and otherwise infiltrated by the bureau during antiwar days.

Despite IPS outcries for special prosecutors and meetings with two attorneys general about the slowness with which they thought the investigation was being conducted, Propper and Cornick quietly won the grudging respect of the leftists. As the case neared its apparent completion, leftists praised Cornick and Propper in one breath and castigated the agencies for which they worked in the next.

Both Propper and Cornick quickly say they have not "solved" the Letelier case, and they lavish praise just as quickly on their superiors and the hundreds of FBI agents across the United States and other investigators throughout the world who have brought the Letelier case this far.

Other point out that, in many ways, the case was the type in which the FBI is at its best—lots of laboratory work, use of informants, massive manpower available for the tedious job of solving international terrorism problems.

Two other major investigators have come to the limelight recently, for example. Assistant U.S. Attorney E. Lawrence Barcella Jr., one of Propper's supervisors, has worked behind the scenes on the case for more than a year and will join Propper in trying the case.

Robert W. Scherrer, the FBI's legal attache in Santiago, also has been indispensable to the case because of the network of contacts and the respect he had built up in eight years in South America, according to several persons involved in the case.

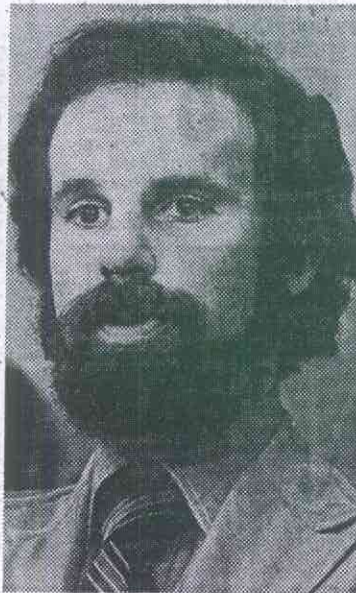
But the major focus of media attention in Chile was on Propper—called "Fiscal" or prosecutor there—and on Cornick or Barcella as they made a total of three trips to Santiago this spring. They have told Associates how reporters for the sensationalist press in Chile would try to talk their way into hotel rooms at 8 a.m. for interviews, guess the identity of who might be with Propper at any one time, seek them out in restaurants, and try to identify persons with them by bracelets or rings.

During the first two trips, the U.S. investigators were treated royally by the press. But by the third trip, when the seriousness of the investigation and its possible aim at high Chilean officials was clear, the atmosphere changed, they have said.

That was when a racy journal accused Propper of using U.S. funds to come to Chile for an assignation with

an attractive female journalist. Newspapers proclaimed in English, "FBI GO HOME." And, as in a Peter Sellers movie, photographers hanging out of Fiat windows chased an embassy station wagon at high speeds through a market district, scattering chickens as they went, trying to take pictures of Barcella and Propper.

Propper, his fame changing to notoriety so quickly after his whirlwind romance with the Chilean press, said he has no plans to return there soon.



**EUGENE M. PROPPER**  
... at first, royal treatment



'... a cocky young man, outspoken in his views about ... office policy, but not any sort of star ...'

